

BATTLING FOR A NATION'S SOUL

Jayantha Dhanapala reports on a political crisis that casts a shadow over Ukraine

An East European country almost 10 times larger than Sri Lanka, with a population of over 44 million and well-known as the fertile breadbasket of Europe, is in the midst of a tug of war between the West and the Russian Federation. It is a postscript to the end of the Cold War a quarter of a century ago.

The public tussle was being enacted in full view of the TV cameras of the world, and the Maidan (Independence Square) in Ukraine's capital Kiev is where supporters and opponents of ousted pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich have battled for the soul of their nation.

How this ends will depend on the tenacity with which Russian President Vladimir Putin will want to ensure that Ukraine remains within the Russian sphere of influence, and President Barack Obama's commitment to resist that.

UNITARY STATE Ukraine is a unitary state composed of 24 provinces, one autonomous republic (Crimea) – a peninsula on Ukraine's Black Sea coast, which is home to 2.3 million inhabitants, most of whom identify themselves as ethnic Russians and speak Russian – and two cities with special status: Kiev, its capital and largest city; and Sevastopol, which houses the Russian Black Sea Fleet under a leasing agreement.

The outcome of the crisis, in which neither the West nor Russia has lily-white



credentials, is the break up of Ukraine, with Crimea – which had already picked its own Prime Minister Sergey Aksyonov – seceding to join the Russian Federation, following the referendum on 16 March – a tragedy which is becoming all too common an outcome of competing interests of the great powers.

While some Eastern European countries that had been part of the old Council for Mutual Economic Assistance

(COMECON) opted to join the European Union (EU), others remained uneasily independent, depending on the Russian Federation for their energy supplies. Ten East European countries joined in a big bang enlargement on 1 May 2004, symbolising the unification of East and Western Europe in the EU. Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007, and Croatia in 2013.

Despite Russian protests over EU enlargement coming right

up to its western flank, there are no plans at present to cease enlargement. The Copenhagen criteria stipulate that membership of the EU is open to any European country that is a stable, free-market economy respecting human rights and the rule of law.

The benefits of joining the EU faded with the depression in the West and austerity measures adopted in its wake. Ukraine flirted with the idea of EU membership, but that changed

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APP PHOTO/ALEXEY KRAVTSOV

ANTI-WAR SENTIMENT People attend an anti-war rally in the Ukrainian Black Sea city of Odessa, on 2 March. Ukraine placed its army on full combat alert, but with ageing equipment and limited personnel.

Protest Laws. Anti-Government demonstrators occupied buildings in the centre of Kiev, including the Justice Ministry building, and the riots of 18-20 February left 98 dead and thousands injured. Due to violent protests on 22 February, Members of Parliament found the President to be unable to fulfil his duties and exercised their constitutional powers to call an election for 25 May, to elect his replacement.

Eventually, Yanukovich fled (marking his second ouster) to the safety of Moscow, leaving a confused political situation with Acting President Oleksandr Turchynov in Kiev, and clashes erupting between pro and anti-Russian Ukrainians. Armed men appeared in Crimean airports, followed by Russian armoured vehicles, sparking off allegations of a Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russia's Parliament promptly approved the dispatch of troops to Ukraine, despite threats of sanctions from the US and EU. Meanwhile, a UN Security Council resolution was vetoed by Russia.

US-RUSSIA PARITY

In the US, Obama has been criticised for doing too little, too late. Warning Russia against any rash moves, Obama is unlikely to do more, and this has given the Republicans cause to call for more decisive measures. Some have suggested that Ukraine should be 'Finlandised,' as Finland was in the Cold War, so that its neutrality between the West and Russia is ensured.

The final decision should be a democratic one, which is left to the free will of the Ukrainian people. That is not only in the national interest of Ukraine, but also a global imperative for maintaining US-Russian equilibrium.

CURRENT AFFAIRS



with the pro-Russian Yanukovich.

COLD WAR ALLIANCE

Joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was more controversial for the old Warsaw Pact countries because of Russia's sensitivities. The process of joining this 28-member Cold War alliance is governed by Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty and subsequent agreements.

Countries wishing to join have to meet certain requirements and complete a multi-step process involving political dialogue and military

integration. The accession process is overseen by the North Atlantic Council, NATO's governing body. According to numerous independent polls conducted since 2002, Ukrainian public opinion on NATO membership is split. The majority of those polled are against joining the military alliance and many identify it as a threat. Thus, relations with the West are controversial.

The current wave of protests started in November last year, when Ukrainian citizens demanded stronger integration with the European Union.

The demonstrations were prompted by the refusal to sign an association agreement with the EU, which Yanukovich described as being disadvantageous to Ukraine.

Over time, Euromaidan has come to be described as a wave of ongoing civil unrest in Ukraine, the scope of which has evolved to include calls for the resignation of President Yanukovich and his Government.

Violence escalated after 16 January, when the Government accepted Bondarenko-Oliynyk laws, also known as Anti-